DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 434 893 SP 038 828

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TITLE Why Discuss Sexuality in Elementary School?
PUB DATE 1999-04-00
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Montreal, Quebec, Canada, April 19-23, 1999).
PUB TYPE Reports - General (140) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Consciousness Raising; Curriculum Development; Diversity (Student); Elementary Education; Elementary School Students; Elementary School Teachers; Foreign Countries; Homophobia; *Homosexuality; *Sex Education; *Sexual Identity; Student Attitudes

ABSTRACT

It is important to discuss sexuality with elementary students. Elementary teachers can help children learn to share public space with people who are similar and different from themselves. This should include discussions of homosexual people. One reason to discuss sexuality in elementary schools is that it is already present in students' lives (via public spaces, media, and peer groups). Sexuality is present and visible in public images experienced by virtually all Western children, and value judgments are implicit in these images. Curriculum resource materials and teaching strategies employ these value-loaded images long before they admit to talking about sex. Gender role socialization, including the accompanying devaluation of homosexual identities, is an inevitable element of how children are guided to behave by the hidden curriculum of peer interaction and school activities. Often teachers who make independent choices to discuss this controversial issue are presumed homosexual and thereby at risk of job loss. There is no evidence that explicit sex education leads to increased sexual behavior, but teachers do not get much latitude to teach about sexuality. Questions of sex, gender, and homosexual identity can fit into elementary curriculum in many places. Many recent curricula emphasize respect and tolerance for diversity. The mini-society of elementary classrooms becomes more inclusive when all members respectfully interact with diverse individuals and unfamiliar ideas. (Contains 44 references.) (SM)

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Why discuss sexuality in elementary school?

by Kathy Bickmore, OISE/UT

forthcoming in W. Letts & J. Sears (Editors, 1999),
Teaching Queerly: Affirming Diversity in Elementary Schools (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers)

Presented at AERA in Montréal, Canada – April 22, 1999 (draft)

ED 434 893

Elementary schools are places where young people's identity is formed, as individuals and as citizens. As public institutions, schools touch nearly every child, and provide powerful sanction for certain knowledge. Elementary teachers have the capacity to help children learn to share public space with people similar and different from themselves. This chapter discusses why homosexual people should be included in these elementary conversations, and then identifies places in the curriculum where teachers might help children to learn such inclusivity.

The first reason to discuss sexuality in elementary school is that it is already present in students' lives. Assumptions about children's 'innocence' regarding sexuality are outdated. Given the amount of (mis)information about gender relations and sexuality that flow freely these days in public spaces, media, and peer groups, elementary educators could not prevent children from acquiring sexual information, even if we wanted to do so. The recent movie, *It's Elementary*, filmed in six U.S. elementary and middle schools, provides evidence that many young children know a lot more about homosexuality and gender questions than adults might predict. Children in actual classrooms were invited to ask questions and to describe what they thought was meant by the words gay, lesbian, and homosexual. Although they are not a representative sample, these children very quickly generated long lists of information, gleaned from the media and from peers – some of it inaccurate and/or negative, some of it relatively neutral, all of it incomplete (Chasnoff & Cohen 1997). All of the children had heard words such as "gay" used as slurs or put-downs, whether or not they knew their definitions. Children also generally knew that families do not all include one mommy and one daddy, and furthermore that they risk being teased and hurt if they are known to live in unusual families (Epstein 1998).

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Gender identities, including the discomfort associated with violating presumed gender boundaries, are learned early in life. The practice of teasing a playmate by mislabeling their gender is common by age three or four (Garvey 1984, p. 196). By elementary school, peer enforcement of narrow gender roles through homophobic harassment and name-calling has become common (Rofes 1995). The AIDS epidemic and the resurgence of religious fundamentalism have brought homophobia to the surface of public conciousness, unleashing a rash of highly visible intolerance and violence (Aronson 1994, Hoffman 1995). By the time they enter middle school, girls and boys have learned that their gender identity is defined in large part by heterosexual behavior: they generally believe, for example, that a girl 'must' have (or seek) a boyfriend, and vis versa (Harris & Bliss 1997, Mandel 1996). Clearly students do learn about homosexuality in elementary schools – through their peers, if not through their teachers. Because this knowledge is shared covertly rather than in open lessons, it is particularly vulnerable to inaccuracy and bigotry.

Sexuality is present and visible, although generally unremarked, in the public images experienced by virtually all children in the western world (Richardson 1998). Public figures, television shows, comic strips, billboard advertising, and so forth present powerful implicit models of what it means to be a valued member of the society (Epstein & Johnson 1998). The reason people often don't notice the sexuality in these images is that they assume as 'common sense' the dominant and exlusionary view that 'our way' is to live in heterosexual, married families.

Curriculum resource materials and teaching strategies employ these value-loaded images, including the supposed normality or inevitability of heterosexuality, long before they admit to talking about sex. Just as politicians or comedians often mirror the identities that they assume are familiar and attractive to their audiences, so do elementary teachers. The estimates that teachers and resource authors make of what will be relevant to their students' values and lives are inevitably biased by the educators' own experiences and fears (Ellsworth 1997, Gordon 1992). In the name of comfort and accessibility for the (imagined) typical young student, standardized and increasingly-outdated notions of 'family' are reintroduced to children – unheralded – not as topics to question but as quiet corollaries to lessons on mathematics, geography, or literacy. Thus

elementary schooling inevitably draws upon and influences the sexual aspects of children's developing citizen identitities.

Risky teaching

Gender role socialization, including the accompanying (de)valuation of (homo)sexual identities, is an inevitable element of the ways children are guided to behave by the hidden curriculum of peer interaction and school activities. When brought out into the light of the explicit curriculum, these topics are clearly unsafe terrain for teachers: the news carries recurring scandals in which individual teachers are targetted for saying too much about sex, or for even allowing children to read about the existence of homosexual people (EGALE 1998, Garner 1996). Teachers who wish to teach inclusivity "are in a terrible bind – they can either ignore children's often dangerous misinformation, or step in and address it and be censured" (Giese 1998, p. A13).

Most current public controversies around school censorship in North America involve curriculum and library materials that mention sex, nakedness, or gay/lesbian people, although a range of other topics such as spirituality or race relations are also targetted (Herzog 1994, Miner 1998). At the elementary school level, the troubling truth is that most censorship is self-censorship: materials often have no chance to be challenged or defended, because they never make it into classrooms in the first place (Hydrick 1994). The assumption that children are too immature and impressionable for certain information, and that adults can and should keep such information away from them, has deep historical roots (Adams 1997). As a result of their own sense of students' prior knowledge and maturity, or in anticipation of parents' possible objections, teachers often manage classroom materials and activities in ways that limit democratic foundations such as free expression and access to information.

Official curriculum guidelines, while not representing students' entire learning experience, shed some light on the murky social and political boundaries within which teachers operate. Often teachers who make independent choices to raise the matter of homosexuality are presumed to be homosexual, and are thereby at risk of job loss: where official guidelines "require" all teachers to cover sexual and homosexual topics, they lower the risk of dealing with such controversial material (Khayatt 1997). A

school board equity policy that does not protect sexual preference creates a chilly climate for anti-homophobia instruction (Suhanic 1998). On the other hand, human rights legislation that does include sexual orientation, such as the 1992 amendment to Ontario's Education Act, creates a warmer climate for discussions of homosexuality and a safety net for teachers who do so (Giles & Peer 1997).

The affirmation of gay and lesbian people in elementary curricula is roughly analogous to respecting the rights of religious minorities. A Canadian lawyer who has been successful in protecting homosexual rights explains:

> I don't compare [the identity of] gays and lesbians to race and ethnicity. I compare it to religion. People argue that you could change your sexual orientation. I argue that you can change your religion, but while you have it it's really important to you. And religion is highly protected (Mariana Valverde, in Rau 1998, p. 11).

Substantial risk remains, however, for elementary educators because this precedent in civil rights and economic benefits cases may not extend to freedom of expression in public schools, where religious diversity is not itself well protected. Reading about or discussing any belief or culture has never been shown to cause a child to adopt that way of life (Gutmann & Thompson 1996, p. 66). However, it is precisely these kinds of deeply-held identities, including values and practices involving homosexuality, that are most often censored. Moral precepts are indeed taught in elementary schools, but (by virtue of being implicit and avoiding controversy) they tend to reinforce dominant viewpoints and narrow notions of normalcy, thereby minimizing the possibility of democratic social change.

Sexuality in the elementary curriculum

Sex education curricula are generally intended to provide students with background knowledge and to increase their capacity to make responsible decisions regarding intimate relationships and sexual behaviour. There is no evidence that open or explicit sex education leads to increased sexual behaviour of any kind: on the contrary, it is widely shown either to have no significant effect or to be associated with safer

sexual practices or postponement of sexual activity (Epstein & Johnson 1998 p.172, Lenskyj 1990 p. 219, Reiss 1995 p.375). Since the topic is more often censored, similarly robust evidence is not available regarding explicit teaching about homosexuality. However, consequences would logically be analogous. Giving children concepts, vocabulary and strategies for handling gender role questions and homosexuality is likely to help them to resist homophobic ignorance, to avoid unsafe practices, and to treat themselves and others respectfully (Rofes 1995). Although teachers often are not given much latitude to teach about sexuality, they are certainly held responsible when sex education 'fails' to alleviate problems such as the spread of AIDS (Infantry 1998). The assignment of sexuality education to physical/ health education, and not to such areas as social studies or literature, may exacerbate the tendency of educators to emphasize abstract clinical information rather than human diversity, social justice, and democratic principles.

Questions of sex, gender, and homosexual identity do fit into the elementary curriculum in a number of places. For example, Ontario's recently-approved Health and Physical Education curriculum (grade 1-8) includes a strand called "growth and development...[which] focuses on an understanding of sexuality in its broadest context" and a related strand regarding "personal safety... [which includes] bullying, peer assault, child abuse, harassment, and violence in relationships...[and] living skills such as conflict resolution..." (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training 1998a, p. 10-11). Ontario children, like children in many other locales, are expected to describe animal reproduction by grade 3, to begin identifying human relationship challenges and responsibilities by grade 4, and to discuss puberty and human reproduction biology by grades 5 and 6. Grade 8 emphasizes ethical decision making in relationships and the application of "living skills (e.g. decision-making, problem-solving, and refusal skills)" to sexual matters; it also includes the only mention of HIV and AIDS (p. 19). Because Ontario teachers are not required by elementary health curriculum guidelines to mention homosexuality, teachers who do so may face significant risk. However, there are several places in such a curriculum where discussions of homosexuality could strengthen achievement of the learning outcomes that are given.

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Gender identity and sexuality are to some degree inescapable in literature and social studies lessons, because the characters in human dramas virtually all have gender identities and intimate relationships.

> It is impossible ... to teach almost any piece of literature without transgressing onto the field of sex education. ... Similarly, imagine biology without human reproduction, geography without population studies ... or religious education without a consideration of the roles of men and women. (Reiss 1995, p. 374)

Although sexual identity is at least implied in nearly any story, elementary-level literature used in school generally avoids explicit (or affirmative) mention of homosexuality. For example, homosexual characters (all white and male), appear in one children's picture book out of 97, and one of 144 juvenile literature books, published in Canada in 1994 (Wilson & Green 1995; also Apostal 1998). However, the vast majority of those stories do quietly include sexuality in the form of normalized nuclear family characters and heterosexual relationships. Ironically, heterosexuality is particularly emphasized when the characters are distant from the dominant culture in other ways. Perhaps to make literature about culturally dominated groups seem more familiar to mainstream readers, characters who are not middle class and white anglophone are even more consistently portrayed in stereotypically heterosexual families.

Ontario's elementary language curriculum emphasizes skills for interpreting diverse viewpoints, communication with various audiences, and justification of opinions on personal concerns and issues. By grade 7, students are expected to "clarify and develop their own points of view by examining the ideas of others" (Ontario MET 1997, p. 37) and to "respond constructively to alternative ideas or viewpoints" (p. 46). Unfamiliar and controversial writings and ideas, such as literature regarding homosexuality, would be essential for meeting such curriculum outcomes.

Homosexual people are never explicitly mentioned in Ontario's new social studies curriculum, but students' development of "respect, tolerance, and understanding with regard to individuals, groups, and cultures" is given as an overall goal (Ontario MET 1998b, p. 7). In grade 2, students "demonstrate an understanding that communities may be made up

of many cultures" (p. 17). In grade 5 students "broaden their understanding of life in a democratic society" and study human rights and the Canadian Charter of Rights (p. 37). Canada's federal legislation does not yet explicitly protect homosexuals, but gay and lesbian rights claims have been made on the basis of both federal and provincial human rights codes. The grade 7 and 8 guidelines emphasize conflict, change, and conflict resolution (pp. 47-48, 53-54). As with the health and language curriculum, teachers are not required to deal with homosexuality in Ontario social studies lessons, but they could meet outcomes that are identified in the curriculum guidelines by doing so.

Many teachers' quiet choices to censor homosexual topics are influenced less by fear of political controversy than by the challenge of managing conflictual topics efficiently. The increasing pressures of curriculum accountability make some teachers averse to risking deeply-meaningful topics, such as human relationships and sexuality, that might open unpredictable avenues for learning and thus not meet narrow short-term objectives. In striving for comfortable classroom environments and high achievement scores, elementary teachers often avoid the vital issues that make social studies, in particular, worth knowing (Houser 1996). As a result, students and teachers often consider such school knowledge to be unimportant and uninteresting, thus they miss out on learning that might help them to develop into empowered democratic citizens (Bickmore 1997, Hahn 1996). Discussing sexuality with elementary students is risky – but necessary – because of its very importance to their personal and political lives. "The need for student-centered instruction [on meaningful issues] does not diminish simply because the students' experiences are socially volatile" (Houser 1996, p. 302).

School safety and conflict management practices, as well as formal curriculum topics, are spaces for teaching the skills and inclinations for participation in inclusive democracy. Efforts to teach children about homosexuality are easier in school contexts that label and limit bullying, gender-based harassment, and heterosexist targetting of teachers and students (Scott 1995). Paradoxically, the opposite is also true: episodes of extremist violence against homosexuals have inspired social movements for curriculum reform toward inclusivity (Lenskyj 1994). Conflict resolution skills and inclinations against intolerance are by no means

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sufficient for the development of democracy or the elimination of sexism and homophobia, but they are necessary elements, perhaps even prerequisites (Avery et. al. 1997, Bickmore 1996).

If we want children to be safe in the long run, and if we want them to learn, then the risky roads of facing conflict and sensitive issues must be taken. To develop the capacity for self-preservation, the sense of themselves as a part of the community, and the freedom of thought that are associated with democracy, children need opportunities to practice using the associated concepts and skills (Bickmore 1999). Even preschool children have some capacity to understand and talk through conflicts (Garvey 1984, p. 143). Children build autonomy and confidence for handling difficult questions, attending to contrasting viewpoints, or making decisions by *doing* so, in the protected but pluralistic space of the public school (Kamii 1991, Lewis 1996). Carefully-designed education about sexuality, including homosexuality, can provide such an opportunity. Otherwise, we abdicate responsibility for children's safety and their inclusion in democratic society, leaving them to sort through unreliable sources of information on their own.

Conclusion: censorship and citizenship

Debates about sexuality-related education in elementary schools tend to hinge on the problem of children's vulnerability, their need for protection. Sexuality, and homosexuality in particular, is generally seen to be unsafe content for young children's classrooms. This assumption misjudges what many children already know about themselves and their world, and also misses the point of what helps an 'innocent' to develop into a self-sustaining 'citizen.' Children's relatively small size and power, and their relative *lack* of knowledge, is what makes them vulnerable. As they grow up, chidren gain the power to protect themselves by learning to acquire and evaluate knowledge, not by being denied information. Young people's self-determination as citizens depends on their opportunities to learn, to correct their misunderstandings, and to get along with diverse others in their communities.

The tragedy of censorship is not only for children whose own experience with gay and lesbian friends or families are rendered invisible or invalid, but also for their classmates. The stories to which children

are exposed inform their their understandings of what their world can be like. Depriving children of a broad range of ideas limits their capacity to re-imagine their social world.

> [T]he imagination can be seen as the basis of all experience in the young child. It is out of the spectrum of the possible presented by stories that tease the imagination that the child selects and constructs the 'real' (Kohl 1995, p. 65).

If we hope that the new generation will re-create a social world that includes less sexism, homophobia, and bigotry, then we need to expose them to stories that suggest such a need, and such a possibility.

It is important to recognize the social systemic nature of bigotries such as heterosexism: it is not the 'abnormal' individuals being targetted who need fixing, but rather the others in their groups who must learn to include them as citizens. The group must become unaccustomed to excluding certain individuals from shared space.

> [An elementary classroom is the child's] first real exposure to the public arena. Children are required to share materials and teachers in a space that belongs to everyone. Within this public space a new concept of open access can develop if we choose to make this a goal. Here will be found not only the strong ties of intimate friendship but, in addition, the habit of full and equal participation, upon request. ... In general, the approach has been to help the outsiders develop the characteristics that will make them more acceptable to the insiders. I am suggestiong something different: the *group* must change its attitudes and expectations toward those who, for whatever reason, are not yet part of the system (Paley 1992, pp. 21, 33).

The mini-society of an elementary classroom becomes more inclusive when *all* of its members practice respectfully interacting with diverse individuals and unfamiliar ideas. Instead of trying vainly to protect young children from the discomforts of learning, teachers can gently "invite [students] into the ongoing predicament" of a world that includes troubles such as homophobia (Ellsworth 1997, p. 24). By confronting conflict in an

open and caring manner, elementary teachers can create social spaces in which a wide range of children and ideas are accepted and thus enabled to contribute their gifts to the community. Thus the children may learn, as developing citizens, to question the categories and rules that have formed them, and to create a new world with more democratic space for all.

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Why discuss ~~sex and gender~~ sexuality in elementary school?
by Kathy Bickmore

Abstract

Dissonance and conflict are the sparks that both motivate and facilitate learning. With the good intention of creating 'safe' learning environments, some elementary school curricula and policies virtually eliminate challenging learning opportunities such as education about sexuality, homosexuality, and homosexual people: As a result, school knowledge becomes boring and distanced from the lived experiences of children, as well as biased toward dominant cultural and political ideologies. There is no evidence to substantiate the fear that children are unable to handle the challenging or the unfamiliar. On the contrary, diverse or dissonant ideas help children to learn to reason, to value, and to solve problems. Children who are exposed to the mass media, and to their own diverse local communities, already encounter all kinds of human and ideological differences: it would be irresponsible to refuse to air and answer their consequent questions in school.

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